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## **Redesigning Borderlands. Using the Janus-face of borders as a resource.**

Henk van Houtum and Mark Eker<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Even after about decades of experimenting with cross-border cooperation in the European Union, it can be ascertained that the critical potential of borderscapes in the EU is still underexplored and underused. There is a general lack of cross-border political power and will to really make an integral, creative spatial design of the borderlands. What is more, in the current thinking of borderlands, the conceptual interpretation of borders is still limited, and often restricted to either borders being the end of a national planning zone or a hindrance or barrier for cross-border harmonisation. The ambiguity, the ambivalence, the interplay between here and there, the quietness, the interesting contrast that borders offer is hardly integrated in the plans of cross-border cooperation. The conceptual and more locally focused contextual richness that has been developed in most parts of the fields of border studies over the last decades or so (Paasi, 2005; Van Houtum *et al.*, 2005; Wilson and Donnan, 2012) has therefore not found its way into concrete cross-border planning and design. Also for the country where we live and work, the Netherlands, despite having one of the oldest cross-border regions in its domains, the 'Euregion', this observation holds. The Dutch have a long-standing tradition when it comes to landscape and urban planning and design. But for the case of border regions, there is a remarkable lack of interest. Yet, perhaps it is a conscious blindness that is the result of uncritically following the political lines on maps and the taking of these lines for granted. That is a missed opportunity. For the regions themselves, but also for the further development of the debate in border studies. For, if we accept the idea that a border is a construct, a social design, which is common knowledge now in border studies, and no longer see it as given, fixed, or linear, it means that there is also room to redesign a border and hence there is a possibility to tell another, more liberating narrative of the same border, one that goes beyond the existing political planning narrative of the border being the end of a national planning zone. The freeing of borders from a single-minded interpretation as political sovereignty lines is well in line with recent debates in radical cartography. In this debate it is argued that it is necessary to free the map from political statecraft and political cleansing, what could be termed 'cartopolitics' (Van

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Houtum, 2011), in favor of artistic, creative and democratic mapmaking that express other than only state powers (Van Houtum, 2013). It is remarkable that despite many debates on methodological nationalism and warnings against falling into the territorial trap of the nation-state, in borderland design and planning this is still what is the dominant tendency. Despite by now within critical border studies and aligning disciplines the idea has gained much ground that political borders are only one way of showing power, divides and connections in today's globalised world and arguably not the most important anymore, in any case not the only one. Yet, the default option when representing borders on the globe is still to show the 19<sup>th</sup> century state borders as if nothing has changed. So, despite the turn to bordering studies, the static visual representation of state borders still inspires most of the work in the field, thereby reproducing dominant state planning practices (Van Houtum, 2011). Our chapter is a plea to investigate the possible remapping, redesigning and the taking seriously of a more creative development possibility for border landscapes.

### **Division as an opportunity**

To begin our appeal for an emancipatory redesigning of border(land)s we start with the term border landscape itself. Scape originally means to shape, to create. As we explained in a special issue of the Dutch journal 'Agora' (Van Houtum and Spierings, 2012), entitled 'Borderscapes', scapes comes from the Dutch term 'Scheppen (to create) and the past tense of 'Scheppen' which is 'geschapen' (was created) in Dutch, and the Dutch term 'Landschap', which means something like a created land. This term was turned into 'landscape'. Interestingly, recently, the Italian researcher Chiara Brambilla picked this up as well in her assessment of the critical potential of borderscapes (2014), as did Alice Buoli in her upcoming dissertation<sup>2</sup> and the EU-funded research consortium EUBORDERSCAPES. And earlier, used and interpreted differently, Kumar Rajaram, and Grundy-Warr (2007) also hinted at the potential of the hidden geographies of borderscapes. With this idea in mind, to go back to the origins of the word Scares, to see borders as scapes, as land to be developed and designed, we recently published the book «Borderland: atlas, essays and design» (Eker and Van Houtum, 2013). The main question there was: what are the possibilities for a reinterpretation of borders as spaces to redesign and architecturally reshape, or in short, to see borders as spaces to create, as 'scapes'?

The start of our research was to distinguish a strip of land 20 km on either side of the border with Germany and Belgium – the area referred to as the 'borderland'. The Dutch border landscape covers about 28% of the land area of the Netherlands. It has 5.8 million inhabitants, and with an average of 494 inhabitants per square kilometre it is more densely populated than the rest of the country (385 inhabitants per square kilometre). The boundary we drew around the border landscape, to define our field of research, is an arbitrary one; it is just as much of a 'construct' or design as the national borders themselves, yet without political sovereignty ambitions. Its purpose is simply to allow one to

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<sup>2</sup> Buoli, A., forthcoming (2015), Border/Scaping, Envisioning the Moroccan - Spanish Landscapes from a Borderlands Design Perspective, Doctoral Dissertation, Politecnico di Milano.

think and talk about the area as a whole, to make it convenient as a subject for investigation. What we did not do, but could perhaps do in a next study, is to investigate the sea borderscape of the Netherlands. In this study we zoomed in on the land borderscape. Arguably, the 'sea border landscape' is more uniform and which generally conjures up just one type of image. The border with the sea is a geomorphological border; it is not a result of agreements or conflicts with others necessarily, although it could be. For the case of the Netherlands at least, from a historical, social and spatial perspective, the land border is a more multidimensional and complex geopolitical construct than the sea border.

### **Borderers**

The growing interest on borderscapes in border studies can be seen as part of a wider interest in no-mans lands, transitional zones, hidden landscapes, white areas and deregulation. Especially in the Netherlands we see a boom in this type of research, perhaps it is born of a realisation that the Netherlands has been planned to a great detail. There is an interesting debate now whether a lack of planning and leaving things alone may just provide some much needed freedom and room for manoeuvre. Discussion on this aspect within the working group for our borderlands redesign study led to the coining of the term 'de-designing', or 'non-designing', and the inevitable question of whether this is actually possible, and how. Perhaps for borderlands this is especially relevant because the border landscape is usually considered as a landscape with a certain cultural heritage value – because of the presence of the border as a tangible and abstract 'fact', because of the activities and characteristics of the area inherent to its location, and because of the often many years during which the current situation along the border was able to evolve. However, the term 'cultural heritage' may lead one to think that our intent was to encapsulate the 'unique and specific characteristics' of this landscape as a sort of museum piece to be conserved – to designate the border landscape with the purpose of fencing it off for preservation. If the border landscape, or parts of it, could be identified so unequivocally and precisely, we believe that only focusing on a strategy conserving it would not be a good idea. Rather, the border landscape is something that 'evolved' often precisely, because for one reason or another it has been ignored, because the border was the 'limit of the plan area' or because it was where passage to the rest of the world had to be facilitated. Seldom has the border landscape been planned or designed in any meaningful way with the idea of making it a landscape itself. The question of how to do this and what interesting possibilities this opens up is what our study set out to investigate.

Right from the very early experimental phases of our research project to redesign borderlands, the aspiration was to make a link between thinking and doing – translating the presence of the border landscape into a meaningful new creative redesign. This is why we brought together various disciplines in the research project. During the first excursions to various borderlands involving landscape architects, town planners, social geographers, artists,

cartographers and art historians, it became immediately apparent that these disciplines looked at borders and landscape in different ways. The social geographers and art historians, who can roughly be described as observers, took the border landscape to be a result of social constructs, processes and events, as an ongoing border work created by different groups of people. Looking at the bordered landscape, they saw a whole socio-political and cultural process. The designers, cartographers, the landscape architects and town planners, primarily perceived the landscape primarily as something that could also be actively remodelled. Looking at the landscape, they saw plans, the relocating rows of trees and dikes, new squares and roads. Despite these initial differences, interestingly, all the researchers involved in our research were initially clearly affected by a strong reflex, a hesitancy or diffidence about entering the imaginary space of the other and daring to think about it and reshape it. Perhaps this is key to the lack of inspiring border designs. We have arguably become too disciplined, too tied to our 'own' national space and too conditioned in thinking that there is only one design for a border, namely the current dominant one represented by fences or lines on maps. So, in the spirit of the philosopher Jacques Rancière, we worked towards becoming true 'borderers' (in German: Grenzgänger), writers and thinkers between and beyond disciplines and internal disciplination (De Boer, 2007). The figure of the Grenzgänger allowed us to focus our attention on the role of interdisciplinary geopolitical narratives and practices, so essential when studying borderscapes. The Grenzgänger typically could be understood as an itinerant of the in-between spaces, a goer who trains his eye on the hidden or latent geographies and does not allow him/herself to be constrained by (urban) borders and monolithic and statist interpretations of spaces (Brambilla and Van Houtum, 2012, p. 28). With this in 'in-between spacers' mind, we found a productive gaze to engage in an interdisciplinary, fruitful discourse in which the border and its landscape was continually reconsidered and recast. The common language we developed was to look at the borderscape as a permanent transition space. Because if there is one constancy in borders, is they will change in terms of location and shape. All borders that have ever been built, have been changed. No border will stay the same. That is perhaps not a popular message for many politicians, yet a historical given. On the internet there are great short videos available that rapidly show the changing of world borders or borders in Europe in human history (see e.g. <http://www.viralforest.com/watch-1000-years-european-borders-change/>). Short little footages like these make abundantly clear that the border as a political strategy and design will undoubtedly change, and most of the times because of violent geopolitical battles not seldom emerging from static thinking. If this is the case, it is perhaps a sensitive idea to 'occupy' the borderlands in a different manner, by not falling in the same old territorial trap and by opening it up for peaceful new designs and bottom-up co-creation, beyond the default statist lines.

### **Border as Janus**

What we envisage for a borderland redesign, is that first it would be essential to analyse and describe the present situation. The idea is that to survey and where possible visualise the form, diversity and qualities of the border

landscape. We did this for the entire Dutch borderland in the aforementioned study. Then, in the second part of the study, assuming that the border is a political construct, a design, we studied the historical, existing and expected political interest in the border landscape. In the third and last part of a borderland redesign we focused on various case areas along the border for which we literally made new scenarios in stories and possible future maps. To inspire the search for new designs, we made use of the theoretical concept of the Janus face (Van Houtum, 2010a), implying a continuum of two different kinds of desires or, their reverse, fears (see figure 2). We explored these two opposite desires as tools for imaging two alternative future configurations for the border landscape. On the one hand this figure makes clear that there is a tendency to retreat behind the border, to close the door and hide away for the world outside. This tendency is what Deleuze and Guattari (1972, 1980) called 'paranoid' desire or what Nietzsche termed «Apollian desire» (1872). Within this desire to retreat, there is a tendency to long for a *here* and *we*, a process of what was described earlier as «Bordering, Ordering and Othering» (Van Houtum, 2002, 2010b). That is, the demarcation of borders in space, often is coincided with the making of an internal Order and is co-constituted with the making of Others. On the other side of the continuum there is what Deleuze and Guattari framed as 'psychoid desire', or what Nietzsche termed 'Dionysus'. Within this desire, there is longing for the Other side, the *there*. It starts from the assumption that if there is a wall, a border, a difference, people will display to wish to look beyond it, to know what is on the other side. As such it stands for another dominant desire in mankind, namely to actively want to escape the homogenising tendencies within the own B/Order and engage with and dwell in the differences across and outside the border. It is an extension of the spirit to go on holiday in strange places and it is this same spirit what Alice drove to look behind the curtain, to enter a land not here, a wonderland over there. Borderlands could actively play with much more creatively with both these desires we would argue. The epistemological two-sidedness of a border, this intrinsic ambivalence and ambiguity, renders a fertile ground for a thinking in border redesign scenarios.

Figure 1 Redesigning the borderland using the Janus-face of borders

<Insert figure 1 here>

Photo: Henk van Houtum

### **Border as a *mise-en-scene***

Using this Janus-face we developed the design strategies for designing the borderscape. Besides 'doing nothing' (autonomous development scenario), the study examined a 'radical dissolution of the border' option (*Community or in-difference* scenario) and a 'strengthening of the border in a theatrical manner' option (*Difference* scenario). These scenarios allow the border to be not only the socio-political result of the present landscape, but also to set the

imagination in motion and underpin visions of what the border landscape might look like. For example, how can wishes or desires be given spatial expression? And how can you design the friction between the various interests in the area? These are questions and exercises that have relevance not only for the border landscape, but also for all forms of designing for borders.

#### *Autonomous development scenario*

A first scenario is no change in the current development of the border landscape. This non-development and non-design implies allowing room for endogenous development in the border landscape and the borderland. The advantage of this is that the border is truly opened up for a new appreciation, a new vision and new interpretations. A possible disadvantage is that the agoraphobia, the fear of the emptiness, and fear of lack of control, which is an important motivation for closing the border, may persist. As a consequence, the open space of such a non-development could become a no man's land. This could be liberating, but it could also drive a wedge between those on either side of the border.

So this scenario sketches what the border landscape would look like if national policies and the EU funded cross-border cooperation programme remain more or less the same. The original intermediaries – the Euregions – gradually would evolve into institutions with an interest in maintaining the status quo. The consequence of this is that while parties on both sides of the border apply jointly for subsidies, they then use them for their own purposes. If the current situation continues, there will continue to be no cross-border integrated spatial plans. Cooperation will remain limited to sectorial issues such as recreational infrastructure, regional promotion, education, healthcare, culture, water management and the construction and upgrading of infrastructure. At the national level, us/them thinking will persist and an area's importance will be measured against national criteria. The differences in planning culture will also largely remain.

#### *'Community' scenario*

In this design scenario, which is inspired on the Apollonian desire of European homogeneity, the importance of national borders would become less relevant. The borders continue to exist, but the differences between the two sides have increasingly little to do with national characteristics, interests and policies. The regions themselves decide what is good for them. Allocation inefficiencies (such as double infrastructure, hospitals on both sides of the border) are sorted out and network optimisation supports sustainable regional development. The housing and employment markets are the first to become fully integrated. Spatial planning also becomes increasingly coordinated and gradually converged in overlapping circles.

National policies and plans are revised in line with common regional interests and there is a dialogue between national principles. The particular qualities of the border landscape are treated pragmatically – as part of the sectorial

policies for culture, tourism, nature conservation and recreation. The Euregions are concerned primarily with optimising the natural and economic infrastructure, which thus becomes increasingly the same on both sides of the border. The border becomes a cultural-historical relict.

#### *'Difference' scenario*

In this scenario the European Union and the national governments have rediscovered the potential of border landscapes as landscape and cultural showpieces and have made the creation of spatial differentiation in the border zone a national policy objective. Following decades of Euregional experimentation it has become clear that real interaction in the border landscape does not come about through attempts to build a sense of collective identity, because the effect on the ground is almost always mediocre. A much more promising strategy is to focus on the specific aspects of the border landscape, such as its two-sidedness and ambiguity. The regional differences in the landscape throw up a range of unique and interesting design challenges for the European border landscapes, which are testing grounds for instrumental physical planning and design. The planning and design of the border zone includes reflecting on the otherness of 'the other'. This perspective is inspired by the Dionysus desire. In landscape terms this does not mean that partners on both sides of the border try to meet each other's wishes or expectations, but rather that the aim is to create an interesting and distinctive border landscape that reflects shared qualities and goals. And offers peak and troughs, as seductive frames. Through speculative, playful themes and extravagant interventions, that illuminate the transformative and non-conflictual, resourceful potential of borderlands, researchers and designers can show how the physical landscape can be used to surprise, challenge, provoke, seduce and serve 'the other'.

The unexpected and unregulated *parasitisation* by 'the other side' of these unilateral interventions is seen in this scenario as a positive thing. Longing is bound up with transience, with coming and going – *Heimweh und Fernweh*. This feeling can be fed by manipulating space and time at the border, undoing and redoing the border; for example, selectively improving or restricting accessibility and in some places expanding the border into a 'border space' between the two nations. One way of encouraging movement across the border is to design housing facilities and landscapes for temporary use. In this scenario the Euregion is the guardian of differences and promotes the otherness of 'the other'.

Using these scenarios as a base we made spatial design plans for various borderlands alongside the Dutch-Belgium and Dutch-German border. Below, by way of illustration, the maps representing the latter two scenarios are shown in figure 2.

Figure 2.1. The border region of the Netherlands-Belgium, present situation

<insert 2.1. here>



Source: Google maps

Figure 2.2 Scenario: 'Community'

<insert 2.2 here>

Source: Eker and Van Houtum (2013)

In this scenario the focus is on doing everything together as much as possible in order to create a truly joint plan for the borderlands that is profitable for both. In this region the Belgian borderland is rather cramped and highly industrial, whereas the Dutch borderland here is sparsely populated and includes many nature and agricultural areas. A truly joint policy could imply that the rather small and hence densely populated coastline of 70km in Belgium is extended to the Netherlands which has a very long and more sparsely populated coast. The Flemish coastline is then doubled to 140 kilometers. That parks and landscapes then truly become borderless and agricultural areas and gain immensely in size. Lastly, an important city like Antwerp in Belgium could for instance given a direct gateway to their ports via the Netherlands. Then no longer there is conflict about the accessibility of that Belgian mainport over Dutch water (the 'Westerschelde'). And the city of Terneuzen in the Netherlands could then truly turn into a true seaport, and accommodate part of the part of the Belgian need for cheap housing.

Figure 2.3 Scenario: 'Difference'

<insert 2.3. here>

Source: Eker and Van Houtum (2013)

In this scenario the focus is on the creation of a different, desirous landscape on both sides. A land over there that is tempting to go to, precisely it is not the same, and not here, but there. Following from this, the contrast in landscapes and societies is consciously explored and exploited. The contrast between the busy, crowded and fragmented part of Belgium and the openness, spaciousness, and tranquility of this part of the Netherlands is seen as a starting point for a redesign. In this scenario therefore the quiet coast of the Netherlands is kept. What is more, the contrast is made even sharper by making new water areas between Belgium and the Netherlands in the coastal zone, so that one would really feel and see the differences when travelling to the other side. The Netherlands could then for instance focus on development of not less, but more parks and natural reserves on less arable soils, on the development of recreational zones and housing for the Belgians. The Dutch borderland could be turned into a slow, natural and recreational landscape, with a huge market of Belgian city-dwellers and gourmet lovers right around the corner. The ports of Antwerp and Ghent would grow further, but then on Belgium soil. And the border could in some towns or landscapes be exaggerated, museumalised or playfully reinstalled as fabricated landscape decors.

### ***Dasein*<sup>3</sup> is design**

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<sup>3</sup> In Heidegger's thinking the manifold notion of *Dasein* (Da-sein: there-being) indicates the distinctive mode of Being realized by human beings in time and space - i.e. a way of living shared by the members of a community (cfr. Heidegger, 1962).

We come to a close. The European Union has already made considerable investments in the creation of a transnational spaces in borderlands, but this project does not seem to have struck deep roots. Numerous bridges have been built, but bridges have a tendency to disregard the underlying landscape. The border area itself, that which lies under the metaphorical bridge, remains undiscovered and untouched by both parties. With our appeal for a creative redesign of borderlands we hope to render new spirit for precisely this forgotten ground underneath those many and often heavily subsidised metaphorical bridges that still creates planning enclosures. For, the problem of enclosure is not due to the border itself, but the traditional interpretation of the border, the conventional meaning given to it (Van Houtum, 2010a). The traditional idea of the border as the territorial limit of a country – the edgeland that serves to protect the heartland – still dominates our thinking. So one could ask whether our persistent desire for national borders and the bounded fear of the other can be made more fluid, more an object to work with, in other words to see a border as a means for a new design policy for the border landscape. A revision of the border may well be insufficient to bring about a fundamental opening up of mindset, but it could be a start. Moreover, it is now within our grasp and there seems to be a chance of creating a fluid perspective, a heterotopia, or, to borrow the expression from philosopher Henk Oosterling, an 'inter-esse': a shift to a halfway area in which opportunities are created for the desire for an outside and an other, without the loss of familiarity and comfort. We can therefore use the border and the borderland as a micro situation, as an exercise in the dynamics between demarcation and boundlessness, a shadow dance of presence and absence. And arguably, the borderland in the European Union is waiting patiently. It has been waiting for a new interpretation since the lifting of the internal borders. This 'policy vacuum' for the border itself as a territory could be seized upon as the subject of a new dialogue between people and the physical environment. This requires an alternative vision of the landscape that is the border. Precisely because the closed or open character of the border largely depends on human interaction and interpretation, the border itself creates room for reinterpretation. It is time for a turnaround in which the border is seen not as the terminus, but the departure point for a new development. After all, we are not only victims of the border. Borders do not only protect and exclude, they are also opportunities, and the periphery is also a beginning. Besides, we are the perpetrators of the border. Laying down a border is a strategic collaborative deed. The reality of a border therefore permits itself to be reformed or transformed, a process in which the borderland can serve as a vehicle for new interpretations.

So we would argue that there is a chance to come up with new design and cartographic interventions in the landscape to stimulate a form of spatial development that imbues the border with a different symbolism, one which is not purely geometric and geopolitical. We feel that alongside the theoretical debate on understanding geopolitical efforts to border, order and other, as this will continue, there is also a need to analytically explore and exploit the borderlands and to redesign the borders as to make the differences and the distinction between here and there and us and them more fluid, more democratic, more organic and leave it less to the power-logic of container-states. To this

end, we must open up our rigid static geometric thinking to the possibility of a play on lines, a *choreography* of the border, without the destructive or exclusive interpretation of the border. For, if we accept that policies for the border have spatial implications, we can then reason backwards: reshaping the borderland will in turn have implications for thinking about national policy. And if we accept the idea that the border can be interpreted differently, and borders can be imagined differently in our heads and projected differently on a map, as human design, this will create room for reinterpretation and re-imagination and redesign. Although the planning emptiness of the borderland may still have an important symbolic function, the lifting, negation and disappearance of the borders in the physical landscape of the European Union has created more scope for reinterpretation. The mono-functional reality of the border is less forcefully dictated by its morphological manifestation, at least within the common physical space of the European Union, and this creates more opportunity for overwriting or recoding that very reality and constructing and representing other realities.

The result would be a fabrication of borderscapes, a new *theatrum*, or *fabrica mundi* of possible borderlands. As opposed to the traditional notion of borders as the end of the open space, the end of the polis, the redesign notion of the border implies the initiation of an open space, a space that is open to reconstruction and revision. Or to play with Heidegger's famous term *dasein*, the new *Dasein* of borderlands is Design! And this is not a task for policy makers or rulers of our territories alone. What we need is co-makership and a sense of co-ownership in redesigning our borders. For, it is primarily up to us people ourselves, as social constructors and designers of our political space, be in it the form of academics, entrepreneurs, citizens, artists or planners, to come up with new emancipatory representations and imaginaries and semiotic meanings of borderscapes.

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